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SUBJECT: GYEONGSANG: ANTICIPATING THE CONSERVATIVE REVIVAL

REF: A. SEOUL 3312

[1](#)B. SEOUL 3225

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Gyeongsang province has long been associated with strong ties to political conservatism. The area's largest city, Busan, is a shipping hub and its economy is dependent upon industrial and trade-related activities centered around its marine ports. Its profile continues to grow on the international scene as it played host to a 2002 World Cup game and the 2005 APEC forum. Traditionally conservative, Gyeongsang's population has consistently voted for politicians from the Grand National Party (GNP) and tend to support politicians with home and family ties to the region. GNP candidate Lee Myung-bak's current dominance in the presidential race has led to a near certainty among regional observers that he will carry the day on December 19, despite early concerns about the outcome of the BBK stock manipulation investigation and a potential split vote between Lee Myung-bak and independent candidate Lee Hoi-chang. END SUMMARY.

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Busan: A Conservative Stronghold  
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[1](#)2. (C) On November 29-30 poloff traveled to Busan in south Gyeongsang province on the southeastern tip of the Korean Peninsula. The port city of Busan and the Gyeongsang province in general are a traditional bastion for conservative politics, and the region almost exclusively supports the Grand National Party. The current GNP was officially founded in 1997 in a merger of several older center-right parties whose key leadership was derived from traditional ruling political elites with roots in South Gyeongsang Province. Former GNP leader and regional political patron-saint Park Geun-hye is also a Gyeongsang native and still receives strong public support in the region. The strong Gyeongsang support for the GNP is attributable not only to regional ties to party leadership, but also to the party's free trade oriented platform -- popular in a region that thrives on shipping and other trade-related enterprises.

[1](#)3. (U) The Busan region continues to support conservative politics and currently GNP candidate Lee Myung-bak (LEE MYUNG-BAK) registers support a rate of just over 40 percent. The conservative independent candidate Lee Hoi-chang posts

just under 17 percent approval, and United New Democratic Party (UNDP) candidate Chung Dong-young trails with just under 13 percent approval, according to a Busan Ilbo poll on November 29. While Lee Hoi-chang's support has suffered somewhat as a result of his departure from the GNP, he still maintains support from a number of Park Geun-hye's followers -- who tend to embrace stricter conservative policies than those promoted by the overall GNP -- despite her open endorsement of Lee Myung-bak.

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The Election in Busan: Show's Over?  
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14. (C) The mood in Busan surrounding the current election is interesting given a strong indication that December 19 will result in a return to executive power by the GNP in South Korea after a decade of progressive governments. While Lee Myung-bak's campaign in Busan appears well organized and events and promotions are constantly taking place, they appear somewhat lackluster. Despite an almost evidential victory for conservatives on December 19, political commentators, academicians, ever-authoritative taxi drivers, and citizens in general appear, on the whole, disinterested in the election. The overall feeling of eventuality apparently is leading people to feel less obligated to show enthusiasm and support because they feel the race has already been won. In a discussion with poloff, Dean and Professor of International Relations at Busan University's Graduate School of International Studies, Dr. Kim Chang-soo, stated that "maybe Lee Myung-bak has already won this race." He also indicated that he felt some of the lack of interest and enthusiasm in the campaign was because it was still too far from the election day, and that people would not begin taking notice of things until the week before the election.

15. (C) Despite comments indicating the near certainty of a GNP win on December 19, there was healthy debate in Busan over how Lee Myung-bak's connection to the BBK stock manipulation scandal would influence the public's support. Those individuals who showed interest in the election tended to be waiting for the results of the prosecution's report on December 5. While those individuals that poloff spoke with seemed concerned about the results of the report, polls in the region indicate that Lee Myung-bak's supporters would continue to support him despite any connection that might be drawn between him and the scandal.

16. (C) A Busan Ilbo poll in late November showed that nearly 67 percent of Lee Myung-bak's supporters in the region would continue to support him regardless of the outcome of the prosecution's investigation, while less than 25 percent would not. Interestingly, the same poll showed that only 25 percent of people surveyed trusted Lee Myung-bak's rebuttal of the allegations, over 38 percent believed the allegations against Lee by his former business partner and alleged mastermind of the BBK scheme, Kim Kyung-joon. Chung Hae-moon, Ambassador for International Relations for Busan Metropolitan City, said in a discussion with poloff that regardless of the investigation's outcome people in Busan would continue to support Lee Myung-bak for two reasons. First, the public sees his performance and success as Seoul Mayor as an indication of his ability to create progress despite opposition and turn his enemies into supporters. Secondly, regional loyalties would follow the GNP, despite strong contingencies of support for Park Geun-hye that might be swayed towards Lee Hoi-chang.

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Voters Priorities Shifting  
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17. (C) While previous elections have shown that Busan voters place high priority on the moral caliber of their elected officials, recent trends indicate that people are more concerned with a candidate's ability than moral track record. In the same conversation with poloff, Ambassador Chung stated that it was clear that people's priorities had

changed, and the slow-down in economic growth was causing people to seek a new kind of president with the capability to make change. He also said that he did not think the people considered the BBK scandal to be a great strike against Lee because he was not a public official at the time of the incident. Chung explained that while the public expected elected officials to be more honest because they represent the people and are using taxpayer's money, private businessmen are often involved in these kinds of affairs, so the whole situation was not that surprising. He expressed, along with others, the feeling that the results of the BBK investigation could possibly hurt Lee Myung-bak, but would most likely not change the outcome of the election.

18. (C) The shift in priorities is also apparent in the opinions of college-age voters. A South Korean saying about political orientation states: If you're not a liberal when you're 20, then you have no heart; if you're not a conservative by the time you're 30, then you have no brain. While student voters have traditionally supported progressive presidential candidates, recent economic pressures and concerns about job availability and stability for young adults finishing their college educations seem to be pushing them closer to the conservative side of the political spectrum. Exit poll results for the 2002 presidential election indicate that Roh Moo-hyun received the support of 59 percent of voters in their twenties, while current polls show that liberal candidate Chung Dong-young receives less than 20 percent support from the same age bracket.

19. (C) Busan Ilbo editorial writer Lee Myung-goan said in a discussion with poloff that student's economic concerns were now trumping traditional youthful progressive values like North-South unification and independence from the United States and moving them to support political platforms based on economic growth and development, instead. A Busan Ilbo poll in late November showed that 45.5 percent of students surveyed considered the economy to be the most important issue in the election, followed by wealth distribution and social depolarization at 19.3 percent. Unification and peace received the lowest score with less than 3 percent viewing it as the most important issue. Despite these concerns and apparent shift toward the right in an attempt to elect a leader more capable of rectifying the current economic situation, Busan students are much like the rest of the population in that they show a general disinterest in the candidates and the election overall. A Busan Ilbo poll in late November showed that while nearly 84 percent of the students surveyed in the Busan area planned to vote, nearly 30 percent had not yet chosen a specific candidate to support. Lee Myung-bak earned the most support with about 28 percent surveyed in his favor, followed by Lee Hoi-chang with 19 percent. Goan said it was possible that students were waiting for the outcome of the BBK investigation, but more likely that they simply had not taken an interest in the election yet, and would not until closer to the actual election day.

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Economic Concerns at the Forefront  
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110. (C) While general disinterest was a reoccurring theme in election discussions, the other main topic of conversation was the domestic economy, and candidates' abilities to make change. According to Park Jae-hwan, leader of the Trade & Business Promotion Team at the Busan Chamber of Commerce & Industry, the economic situation in Busan is one of the most troublesome in South Korea. The public, he said, was looking to the GNP--after 10 years of progressive administration's failure to improve the economy--to produce a conservative leader that would restore the high levels of growth previously experienced in Korea. He said most people felt that Lee Myung-bak was that leader.

111. (C) When queried about expectations about Lee Myung-bak's plans jumpstart economic growth by building a canal stretching the length of the peninsula, most people

were skeptical and disinterested. "No one is interested in the canal," said Park, "people are more interested in supporting the GNP than in Lee Myung-bak's canal idea." Dr. Kim also indicated to poloff that he doubted the canal would be built due to overall cost and environmental ramifications.

Although Busan could potentially benefit from such a project, the general opinion was that the canal project was unlikely to materialize, and therefore was not worth much discussion.

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GNP Gearing Up for April  
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¶12. (C) While visiting the GNP's Busan headquarters poloff noted that there was a buzz of activity, but conversations with First Deputy Secretary General of the party, Representative Ahn Kyung-yul indicated that the buzz was not necessarily directed exclusively at the December 19 election.

"I am always preparing for an election," said Representative Ahn, who said he was already engaged in preparations for the general elections in April. With Lee Myung-bak's victory becoming a clearer possibility every day, the GNP stands poised to do well in the National Assembly elections on April 9, and many in Lee Myung-bak's camp are probably preparing to ride their newfound political capital to seats in the nation's legislature. Representative Ahn, only a few days before the release of the BBK investigation, seemed confident that the interim report would clear Lee Myung-bak of all associated charges. As he pointed to the countdown calendar on the wall indicating the 21 days left until election day he said, "We have only 21 days left. We have much to do, but they, (presumably the UNDP and Lee Hoi-chang's camps) they have no chance."

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) While support for the GNP is still high, general disappointment and disinterest in the election is prevalent in Busan as it is in many other regions. With the announcement of Lee Myung-bak's lack of culpability in the BBK scandal on December 5 Lee Myung-bak's support will most likely rise in Busan city and the Gyeongsang province in general as he wins back some of those supporters who had moved to Lee Hoi-chang's camp when the investigation began. Lee Myung-bak's expected win will most likely serve Busan well as the party, when in power, has funneled investment and government projects to the city and region. Lee Myung-bak has also convinced Park Geun-hye to support him openly, and most likely promised her significant influence in the party and potentially his administration following the election. Park's popularity in the Gyeongsang region and re-enforced power in the GNP will likely make her a political force to be reckoned with in the future.

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